

The Value of Universal Well- being and Bodhisattva

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The varied interests, objectives and ideologies of the adherents of a religion give rise to the diversifications of the religious tradition over the period of time. It takes place when a sizable of people of the religious tradition come to believe that existing doctrine, faith, rituals and related literature have become stale and useless for the masses and a reformulation is needed to meet the social circumstances and the aspirations of new ages. They set out to bring about the desired reformation in their religious faith which normally culminates in the major and vertical split of the religious tradition. The different objectives and ideological perspectives of the adherents of Buddhism also led to the far reaching diversification and split in the Buddhist philosophy and religion.

In Buddhism the seed of schism was sown during the second Buddhist council roughly two hundred years after the parinirvana of the founder on the issue of teaching and discipline preached by the master so that it could reach to the masses. Two hundred years after the Buddha's death, Buddhist found its devoted and enthusiastic patronage in the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka who transformed Buddhism into a religious movement and a religion of the layman. During his time, Buddhism transcended the boundaries of India. To make it a popular religion he promoted a prevalent cult of worship of local holy places which were easily accessible to everyone without distinction.

After the death of King Ashoka, the center of Buddhism in India shifted to the northwest of the country. By the first century B.C.E, out of the disputes and divisions among Buddhist teachers, a new movement had coalesced. It became, in effect, the second major branch of Buddhism, known to its adherents as Mahayana. The Mahayana movement came into existence in India, but flourished in the nation of

East Asia when Mahayana missionaries carried their interpretation of Buddhism from northwest India into China in the first century C.E. The followers of Mahayana though interpreted the teaching of Buddha differently yet always claimed that they adhere to the real teaching of the founder. In other words they rather emphasized that what they preach is the real teaching of Buddha. According to Mahayana Buddha taught much more than is contained in the pali Canon and manifest in the Theravada or Hinayana schools. They claim that the Buddha taught much in secret to disciples who could understand this higher truth. He threw down many leaves, so to speak, and only a few picked them all up. (William. A. Young, p. 139)

Madhyamika says that empirical truth is followed by the laymen who are guided by on subject centric view or the other and the transcendent truth is realized by wisemen in the background of emptiness. The realization of this distinction has far reaching consequences for ethical holism. It is the distinction between the lower value as personal or selfish good and the higher value as public or universal good. The former is neither invaluable nor to be discarded. Since its application is too narrow, it requires to be broadened or transcended for achieving the holistic goals... This is the ethical holism of the Madhyamika doctrine of emptiness whose instrumental value lies in creating conditions for creations for creative peace, harmony, ecological balance and responsibility, equality, unrestricted practice of moral virtues, promotion of social emotions and high quality of life at the global level, (Hari Shankar Praasad, p. 298, 299)

Mahayana sees the element of selfishness in the approach of Theravadins and Hinayana saints who adhere to a lower to a lower ideal and are anxious to attain their own liberation only. Mahayana regards the salvation of all sentient beings as the higher ideal and contends that the greatness of their faith lies in this ideal. The Mahayana monks hold that their accommodating spirit can be traced back to the catholic concern which the Buddha himself had for the enlightenment and salvation

of all beings. The life of the founder sets an example and ideal that enlightenment should be sought not for one's own salvation but for being able to minister the moral needs of others. Mahayana "pointing to its doctrine of cosmic helps(grace) and its ampler regard for laypeople, claimed to be "Buddhism for the people"... Accordingly it pre-empted the name Mahayana, the Big Raft." (Huston Smith, p.121) Modern Mahayana writers are proud of their faith and love to call it a living and progressive religion and regards the adaptability of Mahayana as the sign of its vitality.

Buddha, as Theravada Buddhism believes, taught a religion of intense self-effort which is devoid of the Super naturals, rituals, authority and tradition. Buddha condemned all forms of divination because, according to him, any appeal and reliance on the super naturals or the transcendent realities encourage monks to adopt shortcuts, easy answers and simple solutions that could divert attention from the hard, practical task of self-advance. Whereas Theravada is nontheistic, Mahayana has elevated Buddhahood to almost theistic status. The common people therefore recognize a multitude of heavenly Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to whom they can pray for help. Mahayana Buddhism allows much more scope for special cults and rituals than the Theravadins do.

Mahayana emphasizes the importance of religious experience and holds that dharma is not embodied only in scriptures. Dharma awakens the quest for enlightenment as the greatest value in life. Thus, Mahayana pantheon which consists of heavenly Buddhas and Bodhisattvas exemplifying specific spiritual qualities as savior beings focuses devotion as way to nirvana. With this zeal Buddhism as a religion has experienced a reawakening and a resurgence which has led to some astounding missionary successes particularly in the East.

Further with the emergence of Mahayan Buddhism, a number unique features came into existence, such as (i) a combination of ethical and social concepts was incorporated into the concept of Bodhisattva, who is an altruistic and compassionate

being, (ii) with this the Buddhist type of devotionism came into practice, and (iii) an innovation of various levels of understanding, truth, and reality made. The belief in Bodhisattva bridged the gap between god and man. The gods were no more furious deities and arbiter of human destiny. They were humanized and made an embodiment of morality and purity. The static neutral cosmic principle (Brahman) was made compassionate and socially active. They were thus made socially relevant. In the new scheme man himself became the potential god, but not as the creator God but as virtuous person. He could also become a demon by becoming non-Virtuous. It is he who is responsible for shaping himself in any manner likes.

In Mahayana Buddhism a saint or semi-divine being who has voluntarily renounced Nirvana in order to help others to salvation is called Bodhisattvas. In popular devotion bodhisattvas are worshiped as symbols of compassion. The enlightened person who prefer to defer his own personal liberation and dedicate their for the liberation of all sentient beings are called Bodhisattava and the ultimate spiritual ideal of these Enlightened Beings is also known as the Bodhisattava. For Mahayan Buddhists, the bodhisattva (literally “a being intended for enlightenment”) has postponed final enlightenment and nirvana for himself or herself in order to help other beings in their spiritual quests. To become a bodhisattva, a person must manifest the innate qualities necessary, and then take the Great Vow of compassion for all living beings. Any person is potentially a bodhisattva, because anyone may take the vow. However, it takes many lives to fulfill the vow. The vow that a Bodhisattva takes has been thus described in one of the Mahayana texts:

“I take upon myself the burden of all suffering: I am resolved to do so; I will endure it. Do not turn or run away, do not tremble, am not terrified, nor afraid, do not turn back or despond..... All beings I must set free..... I must rescue all these from the stream of Samsara, which is so difficult to cross, I must pull back from great precipice, I must free them from all calamities, I must ferry them across the stream

of Samsara. I myself must grapple with the whole mass of suffering of all beings".
(William.A. Young, p. 139, 140,)

The Divine Authors of Salvation

As mentioned earlier, going beyond the Theravada teaching that there is only one Buddha, the Enlightened One in each age, Mahayana preached the concept known as the trikaya "three body doctrine". In Theravada Buddha is an historical figure who no longer exists but who left his dharma as a guide. By contrast, Mahayana regards the Buddha as a universal principle.

Metaphysically, Buddha is said to be an eternal presence in the universe with three aspects, or "bodies"

According to this doctrine there are three separate bodies or natures of the Buddha. One is Earthly Body or nirmana- kaya which the manifestation of the Buddha in our age in earthly form. The Earthly Body is differentiated, personal and limited by Space and Time. Siddhartha is the example of earthly body. Another is Heavenly body of Buddha known as sambhoga-kaya. This Body of Spiritual Bliss so also known as Bliss Body. This is heavenly manifestation of Buddha Body particularly in Celestial or Dhyani Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In other words the heavenly body is the anode of Bodhisattvas and Dhyani Buddhas. The Bliss Body is capable of taking names and forms and offering help to the earthly beings in removing their miseries, showing and guiding along the path to Nirvana. From here they descend down to earth also when they are approached by the needy devotees through worship and prayer. The Bodhisattvas also come down to the earthly realm to help people by removing the ignorance of the later. The heavenly body is the form of Buddha such as Maitreya, Vairocana and, the most popular, Amitabha of pure Land Buddhism and all such Bodhisattvas who inhabit fully spiritual realms. The last is the Body of the Cosmical or Absolute Buddha called dharmakaya, who is present in all reality. From this perspective, each human and every other being has the nature of the Buddha.

The Theravada Buddhism believes in only one bodhisattva i.e. Maitreya, a “Buddha in the making,” in the current era. In fact Maitreya as a Bodhisattva is acceptable to both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism and is believed to be the next Buddha in earthly form.

To the common people, the Mahayana offered the good news of the existence of multitudes of saviours, real and potential, whose chief desire was the cure or amelioration of the sufferings of men. The pure benevolence of these saviours was the best of all assurances. With their help, one could at least hope to gain heaven after death, if not what could only be self- won – Nirvana, In the Mahayana the authors of salvation are of three kinds. They are the Manushi Buddhas, the Bodhisattvas, and the Dhyani Buddhas. (David Noss, p. 199)

Manushi Buddhas are the saviours like Gautama who came on earth as human beings in the past and attained enlightenment, instructed people regarding their true way of life. After accomplishing their objective and duties they attained Nirvana. Now prayer cannot reach them. Manushi Buddhas are basically and primarily enlightened teachers. Bodhisattvas are great saviours.

They are innumerable company of supernatural beings who hear prayers and come actively to people’s aid. Mahayana believes that they have already attained enlightenment and they sit enthroned in the heaven looking down on the needy world. They are needed to guide people of their true path and spiritual goal. Some widely acknowledged and worshipped Bodhisattvas are Maitreya, Manju Sri, Avalokiteshwar, Kshitigarbha etc. These Bodhisattvas are worshipped with great enthusiasm except Maitreya who is well honoured but little worshipped probably because of the faith that he is going to be the next Buddha so he cannot transfer or share his merit to the needy as he is storing and preserving the merits for his future earthly career.

Dhyani Buddhas differ from Bodhisattavas in having fully achieved their Buddhahood (like Manushi Buddha), but they differ from Manushi Buddhas also in not having achieved their Buddhahood in human form. They dwell in the heavens and there is an indefinite interval between their heavenly abode and final entry into nirvana. During this indefinite interval they actively minister to human needs. In fact to meet the human needs they compassionately postpone their ultimate goal of Nirvana. So what Gautama did for the human beings between his enlightenment and parinirvana, the Dhyani Buddhas do between their heavenly abode and final entry into nirvana. There are three well adored Dhyani Buddhas. They are Vairocana, Bhaisajyaguru and Amitabh Buddha. Amitabh Buddha is known as Amida in Korea and Japan. He is regarded as one of the greatest gods of Asia. Once he was a monk named Dharmakara, took the vow to become a Bodhisattva, rose to the present rank. He now presides over the Western Paradise, a Buddha field or domain he has called into existence, named Sukhavati, or the Land of Bliss, generally known as "the Pure Land". His worshippers believe that he being the Lord of the Land of Bliss freely admits all who show sincere faith in him. While Bodhisattvas serve present needs, Amitabh assures future Bliss. Some sects among the Chinese and Japanese believe that the grace of Lord of the Pure Land is granted to anyone who merely repeats with devotion his sacred name. All who had prayed to him in their lifetime would be reborn and live happily in Sukhavati after their death. The Sukhavati is a place where all hindrances to full salvation are removed, so that the way to nirvana is clear. This preliminary stage to nirvana has increasingly become an end in itself, where the blessed live in ecstasy after their death. All beings born in the Pure Land would almost, but not quite be arhats destined for nirvana their Bodhisattva vows bound them for the rebirths. Evil would not be known there even by name. There would neither be teaching nor learning because all would be capable of direct cognition of Dharma and would be able to recite the Dharma informed by the Omniscience.

In this devotional version of Mahayana Buddhism the wisdom aspect of Theravada Buddhism is completely transcended. This devotional form of Buddhism developed when number of Buddhist felt that the existing statements of the doctrine had become stale, irrelevant and useless. With their conviction that the Dharma requires ever new reformulations, so as to meet the need of new ages, new populations, social circumstances they set out to produce a new theistic and devotional form of the Buddhist literature. The main doctrinal innovations of the Mahayana can be summarized under five headings:

- 1- As concerns the goal there is a shift from the Arhat- ideal to the Bodhisattava or Celestial Buddha- ideal;
- 2- A new way of salvation is worked out in which compassion ranks equal with wisdom and which marked by the gradual advance through six 'perfections' (pāramitas);
- 3- Faith is given a new range by being provided with a new pantheon of deities, or rather of persons more than divine;
- 4- "Skill in means" (upāyakaśalya), an entirely new virtue, becomes essential to the saint, and is placed even above wisdom, highest virtue so far;

"Skill in means" (upāyakaśalya), or simply speaking "skillful means" is a special set of method which Bodhisattvas employ for awakening the spiritual potentialities of people. Bodhisattvas are able to see all the Karmic factors in a life situation and thus know just what changes can be wrought to set a person's steps in the right directions. "Skill in means" is a virtue which is indispensable to a Bodhisattva at all times, but which he possesses in its fullness only late, on the seventh stage, after the "perfection of wisdom" has thoroughly shown him the emptiness of everything that seems to be. "Skill in means" (upāyakaśalya) is the ability to bring out the spiritual potentialities of different people, by statements or actions which are adjusted to their needs and adapted to their capacity for comprehension. (Edward Conze, p.32, 33, 34)

- 5- A coherent ontological doctrine is worked out, dealing with such items as “Emptiness,” “Suchness” etc. (Edwards Conze, p30)

The issue that divided early Buddhists is the motto and conviction of the Elders to take Buddha’s valedictory in letter and spirit, “Be lamps unto yourselves; work out your salvation with diligence.” Whatever progress those in this group make will be the fruit of wisdom—insight into the cause of suffering as gained through meditation. The other group held that compassion is the more important feature of enlightenment, arguing that to seek enlightenment by oneself and for oneself is a contradiction in terms. For them, human beings are more social than individual, and love is the greatest thing in the world. (Huston Smith, p. 121)

Adaptability of Mahaya

Mahayana originated within the Mahasanghika sects and it pursued the accommodating spirit and missionary zeal. The accommodating spirit of Mahayana gave tremendous room for the devotional aspects also which is normally the characteristic of a theistic or cultic religion. Mahayana teachers propounded the doctrine of the bodhisattva. Mahayana Buddhists point out that the long life of Buddha after enlightenment was dedicated to the service of suffering being. Mahayana regards the salvation of all sentient beings as the higher ideal and contends that the greatness of their faith lies in this ideal. In the context of this higher spiritual goal Mahayana envisages the Ideal of Bodhisattva. “The great key figure in Mahayana thought is the bodhisattva (“enlightenment being”). Bodhisattvas, almost endless in name and number, dwell rank on rank in Mahayana and flame out from countless Mahayana altars; there are also many of them, known and unknown, at work in this world”. (Robert S. Ellwood and Barbara A. McGraw, p.145) Bodhisattvas are innumerable company supernatural beings who hear prayers and company supernatural beings who hear prayers and come actively to people’s aid. Bodhisattvas possess a great loving heart (Mahakaruna) and all the sentient beings are the object

of his love. Although Bodhisattvas make themselves subject to the laws of birth of birth and death to help and guide people yet their hearts are free from sin and attachment. They are like the lotus- flowers which grow out of mire, yet are not contaminated by it. The Ideal of Bodhisattva rejects the concept the concept of individual salvation. Liberation of all sentient beings is the ultimate goal of every Mahayanist's spiritual aspirations. The vow that a devout Mahayanist takes is that he would attain Enlightenment, the Wisdom State of Existence (Bodhisattava) not to live aloof from the world but to work with perfect Wisdom and Love to remove the misery of the suffering beings and to help them to attain salvation. Thus in Mahayana Buddhism, "the bodhisattva epitomizes the ideal of samsara and Nirvana being not different, for the bodhisattva live in both simultaneously. The bodhisattva is in the world, but without attachment, and therefore is able to see everything as it really is and to work with all its power. Thus, the bodhisattva lives on the level of Void-consciousness". (Robert S.Ellwood and Barbara A. McGraw,p. 145)

The unity of compassion and wisdom is acted out by the six "perfections" or paramitas, "methods by which we go to the Beyond". A person turns into a Bodhisattva when he first resolves to win full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Thereafter until his attainment of a Buddhahood aeons and aeons are devoted to the practice of the Paramitas. So important is this concept that Mahayana often refers to itself as the "Vehicle of Paramitas". The six perfections are: the perfections of giving, morality, patience, vigour, meditation and wisdom. (Edward Conze, p. 32)

The Ten Bodhisattva Stages:

In Mahayana literature we find elaborate formulation explaining the gradual higher and higher stages of perfection in the career of a Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva with his gradual elevation towards the highest stage of perfection or Buddhahood accumulates merit which they can transfer to other needy persons who approach the Bodhisattva for help and guidance in order to get rid of miseries of earthly life. This is

how Mahayana elevates the stature of Bodhisattvas and assigns divine status almost very close to the status of avatars (divine incarnation) of Hinduism. Mahayana envisages the ten distinct stages which the Bodhisattva must go through on his way to Buddhahood. The ten stages are: (1) the joyful, (2) the stainless, (3) the illumination, (4) the flaming, (5) the very-hard- conquer, (6) the face-to-face, (7) the far-going, (8) the immovable, (9) the good-insight, and (10) the Dharma-cloud. Each stage is practiced in concert with a perfection, with four perfections being added to the early list of six: (7) skill in means, (8) determination, (9) power, and (10) knowledge. (Robinson and Johnson, p. 102)

The first six of these stages correspond to the six “perfections”, and each of them is marked by the intensive practice of one of them. The sixth stage therefore corresponds to the perfection of wisdom, and with it the Bodhisattva has by his understanding of emptiness come “face to face (abhimukhi) with Reality. At that point he would be able to escape from the terrors of this world of birth- and-death, and he could, if he wanted to, enter into Nirvana. Out of the compassion he nevertheless makes no use of this possibility, but stays on in this world for a long time so as to help those in it. But though in the world he now is no longer of it During the last four stages a Bodhisattva gains what the text call “sovereignty over world”, and he becomes a kind of supernatural being endowed with miraculous powers of many kinds. From the ordinary Bodhisattvas as they exist on the first six stages the “celestial Bodhisattvas” of the last four stages differ in that they were suited to becoming objects of a religious cult. Soon the faithful increasingly turned to all kinds of mythical Bodhisattvas, such as Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, Maitreya, Ksitigarbha, Samantabhadra, and others. The development of mythical Bodhisattvas was accompanied and even preceded, by that of mythical Buddhas or Dhyanis Buddhas, Who were held to reside in the heavens in all the ten directions. (Edward Conze, p. 32,33)

In view of the above discussions we can say that the devotional, theistic and cultic elements which the Buddhist religious tradition picked up and formulated in its own for the fulfillment of the basic religious aspirations of the masses is a relatively new trend which is humane in its ideal and approach as it vindicates the path and ways for others also and prescribes them to follow the path. It though Godhood in the realm of Buddhism but it leaves room for ethical perspectives by assigning important place to freedom of will. Like some theistic religions it does not have the tendency to negate morality. So despite being devotional Mahayana Buddhism bears the impact of early Buddhism and contains the elements of morality within its domain. It has only departed from the philosophy of individual liberation by self-help and solitary meditation for the monks who lived a secluded life towards the ideal of liberation for all the sentient beings. Actually the Supreme Ideal of Universal well-being of Mahayana is based on the concept that same person can have two states of mind at different stages of the evolution of his consciousness. The transition from subjectocentric to holistic is a change in his attitude and value. This a change in the priority of values, from lower to higher. The external world remains the same in itself in both the states, but the values assigned to it changes.

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